

Address to meeting in
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THE SITUATION IN BRITAIN AND IRELAND

The situation of your brothers and sisters in Britain and Ireland is desperate and deplorable. Their degradation - the primitive conditions under which they are forced to live - the deprivation of their rights, in theory guaranteed by the United Nations Charter and the European Convention on Human Rights, can only be understood and explained by a deep prejudice and hostility, based on ignorance, held by the majority of comfortable, settled people in Britain. The Gypsy people, and their fellow travellers, the Irish and Scottish tinkers as they are called, numbering about 30,000 on the roads, form the oldest minority in the country - but they are the last to be considered in this so-called civilized and affluent society.

In Ireland, where the standard of living is low and the authorities more authoritarian, the situation is worst. Four hundred families have only rag tents 1½ meters high to crawl into for shelter. Another 700 are crowded together in wooden, horse-drawn caravans. The tourists and romantics are delighted with them but not so the poor mothers struggling with eight and ten children and the fathers seeking hopelessly for grass for their horses, harassed day and night by police and officials.

What is so horrifying is that the situation is getting worse - not better. The gap in living standards between the nomads and the settled people is continually widening, because of the lack of opportunities for work and education. As the towns and cities grow, it is harder to find somewhere to camp. The old trades, horse-dealing and tinsmithing, are almost dead. Nobody will employ men who are illiterate and have no settled home. Only a hundred children out of 4,000 are going to school. Nobody wants them : the law says they must go to school but this is conveniently forgotten. The authorities know that they cannot drive people away and at the same time say their children have a right to go to school.

This was the situation when we began to live with travelling people on the outskirts of Dublin in 1963. Our camp was visited by the police and we were ordered to leave. Instead, we went in a delegation, with horses and carts and carrying banners demanding "Justice", to the City Hall. We asked to be permitted to stay camped on the land until the Government decided to establish official camping sites. We asked for a clean, piped water supply, for which we would pay. The answer was, they told us we had no right to remain on any land in the city.

We went back to the camp and held a meeting of all our people, our band of 18 families. We decided to help ourselves by building wooden huts for families living in tents and adults and a school where ~~adults and children~~ could learn to read and write with the help of teachers from the city.

The school was a great success. Many people became sympathetic towards our situation. Doctors and nurses volunteered to help with medical treatment, people sent furniture and equipment for the school. But the city officials had hard hearts. They sent men under police protection to demolish the school. We resisted. Men, women and children barricaded themselves inside the school and refused to leave.

The second time they arrived at 6 ~~am~~ in the morning with chains. We again prepared to resist, building camp fires to light the scene. But there were too many police and we decided to negotiate. The officials promised us that if we departed without resistance they would permit us to stay on other land for one month. We agreed and lined up our caravans on the road, a huge flag hanging from the first. Behind us, the school was pulled down and burned.

When we arrived at the next piece of land, we were horrified to find the police waiting for us. They threatened that if we did not depart before 7 o'clock in the evening they would burn our caravans. Some of us were frightened, some angry. We decided that because the officials had lied to us, there had been a declaration of war between us.

Over the following months there was indeed war. We resisted by building barricades, by refusing to harness our horses, by sitting on the ground using passive-resistance like Gandhi and his followers. Large numbers of police and workmen were mobilized to evict us, as much as four times in ten days. But we continued to occupy and re-occupy land, breaking fences and concrete posts to make entrances.

Until the day came when frustrated and furious, the Special Police arrested me at our roadside camp. They accused me of being a member of the rebel Irish Republican Army and said they had discovered explosives and bullets in the garden of the house owned by us, and accused me of planning to use these to injure people and property.

I answered that these charges were ridiculous because I was born in England and had no interest in Irish rebels and secondly that I was an advocate of non-violence and a believer in the ideas of Gandhi, as our struggle showed. We had used no violence even when attacked.

I was told that I would be sent to prison for 24 years. But I spent only three days in prison and was then granted bail for £500.

As a result of protests to the Irish Government organised by the world Gypsy movement, notably by Vanko Rouda, Ronald Lee, Mateo Maximoff and others, and by Bertrand Russell and other people in the Peace Movement, my trial was continually postponed. Eventually, after 16 months, I appeared in the Central Criminal Court ~~for~~ for half a minute to be told that the charges by the State had been dropped.

I believe that the intention of the police was to frighten us and they hoped that we would leave Ireland and ~~return~~ return to Britain.

Instead, we increased our activity and the campaign grew bigger and stronger. In April, 1964, we occupied a large piece of private land at Cherry Orchard. Forty families gathered here. They built a second school and lessons continued for eight months ; they organised a football club ; and above all ~~we~~ resisted every attempt made to evict us. We dug long trenches, we built barricades and we began to help travelling people in other parts of Ireland to organise, to protest and to demand their rights to have camping sites, to send their children to school and to vote at the elections.

We held meetings, like that at Ballinasloe Horse Fair in October last year, attended by Vanko Rouda. Laurence Ward, King of the Tinkers for 26 years, came to stay with us at Cherry Orchard to join the battle. In Northern Ireland, Gypsy people organised ~~their own~~ a committee and went to Parliament with their demands, just as we had held protest parades in Dublin.

Finally, the Government decided to take action. They did not want more and more bad publicity which would damage the tourist business. The Government put pressure on district authorities to establish official camping sites. There are now plans for 12 camping sites and the first, we are informed, will be completed in Dublin by early next year.

That is the situation in Ireland.

In Britain, our people are not so poor. They live in modern trailer caravans, nobody lives in tents. There are a small number of official camping sites. About one in every six families has a place. A few hundred children are going to school. Men make a living collecting scrap metal, as they do in Ireland. They also asphalt private roads, cut trees and do agricultural work. Women sell flowers, hawk small items and so on. But they are chased and harassed just as mercilessly as their brothers and sisters in Ireland. To obtain regular work in factories they must deny their identity, their Gypsy birth. They feel inferior because they have not had the opportunity to learn to read and write.

There have always been some settled people sympathetic to the situation of Gypsy people. But this sympathy in Britain and other parts of Europe was not, as we know, strong enough to stop the murder of 600,000 Gypsies by the Nazis. It has not even been strong enough to change the attitude of ordinary so-called civilized Governments.

Therefore it is clear that the only way Gypsy people will obtain their rights, equality of status and a better life, is through their own will and struggle.

When a few settled people plead our case, nobody will listen.

When Gypsies demand their rights, with justifiable indignation and anger, the authorities will listen in respect and fear.

When comfortable, settled people give charity to

our people they also give them scorn. Our status remains the lowest.

But when Gypsy people help themselves - build their own school as our brothers did in Ireland - the world respects and admires them.

The problem is not when our are settled people going to realise the situation and do something - this will not happen. We will wait many empty years for that.

But when are Gypsies going to lead themselves towards a better life, a juster status.

The Negroes in America were freed from slavery a hundred years ago. But nobody congratulated them, admired them. They remained low in status, remained poor. They did not free themselves so they/were left without rights, without equal opportunity - until the start of the Civil Rights Movement in recent years.

Now people admire them, congratulate them - politicians fear them.

I believe that the problem for us - our task - particularly myself as a non-Gypsy - is to help and stimulate our people to lead themselves, rather than to attempt to persuade settled people to help.

When we have a strong Gypsy Civil Rights movement our voice will be heard and the situation will rapidly change.

In Britain we ~~are~~ attempting to build such a movement. It is difficult because ~~they~~ our people are illiterate, they are afraid, they are apathetic. But we are attempting to awaken them just as travelling people in Ireland awoke and acted heroically.

As is probably true here in France, what is wrong with the situation is that outside people, whether sympathisers or enemies, never consult our people directly. They are evicted, driven away, by official order; or settled in recognised camping sites by official order. They are never given the opportunity to represent themselves.

Even on the few occasions when our people have established committees to represent themselves, they have been turned away from 'public' meetings, refused audience with members of the Government, etc.. In all affairs, even those that rightly only concern them, their opinion is not asked ; they have no voice, no vote.

All this must be familiar to you as it is to us in Britain. Every time it happens it makes us angry.

This process, by which our people are pushed about like animals, is degrading. They are forced to feel inferior, forced to feel they cannot carry responsibility even for themselves. As leaders, even when fighting injustice under difficult conditions - conditions which call for strong leadership - we must stimulate, encourage and prize above all else the independence and self-reliance of every one of our people.

Unless they ~~shy~~ have the opportunity to made decisions and carry responsibility during the struggle for rights, they will not be strong enough, mature enough, to protect these rights, when they have been won, against those who will attempt to take them away again.

Just as a man grows physically strong, strong in body, by exercising his muscles - so it is equally true that a man grows strong in judgement and wisdom through ~~ever~~ exercising responsibility, by making decisions and by using initiative.

It is not right or healthy for leaders, top leaders, to carry all the responsibility because they will only succeed in preventing the growth of the people they are leading.

This is our problem when our own people are apathetic and appear to take no interest in what we are trying to do. But we must be patient and at every turn make sure that they are carrying responsibility as well as us - so that eventually, little by little, our people will emerge from their oppressed state to be - each one of them - free and independent people.

One day - not too far in the future - our job will be finished. Younger people will say "We don't need these hard-headed many any more. Let us take over our affairs." Then we will know that we have succeeded and that it is time for us to retire.

And we know, my wife and I, that we - as outsiders - must be the first to retire. There will come a day when we will not be wanted or even welcome here. As the movement progresses and grows, we will get the sack, lose our jobs. And we must be pleased and happy about this because it will mean true progress.